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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5739
INFO RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS PRIORITY 1124
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0192
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1805
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0761
RHMFSS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 000628

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, INR/AA
BAGHDAD FOR DMCCULLOUGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/25/2019

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KIRF ASEC NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: EASTER MONDAY SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN NIGER STATE

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On April 13, sectarian violence broke out in the town of Gwada, Niger State before spreading to the capital of Minna, resulting in over 20 injured, three churches burned, and additional property destroyed. Press reports claimed that over 110 people were arrested in relation to the violence, an allegation that was disputed by Abdul-Malik Usman, Senior Special Assistant to the Niger State Governor. Usman said that if that many people were taken from Gwada, there would hardly be any village left. Usman maintained the violence was not religious in nature, but rather a power struggle between traditional rulers that fell along ethnic and religious lines. End Summary.

¶2. (U) According to multiple reports, the violence began the morning of April 13 in the town of Gwada, Niger State, when youths (reported to be "Muslim fundamentalists") attacked a Christian procession of worshipers celebrating Easter Monday. The reports claim the youths injured over 20 people, burned three churches, and destroyed property worth millions of naira (tens of thousands of U.S. dollars). The violence then spread to the state capital of Minna, where youths reportedly attempted to burn the First Baptist Church. Unsuccessful in destroying the church, the youths allegedly destroyed several vehicles before the police arrived. April 15 press reports claimed that 110 suspects were arrested -- 98 from Gwada and 12 from Minna -- and were being held until a court hearing scheduled for April 20.

¶3. (C) On April 15, Poloff spoke to Abdul-Malik Usman, Senior Special Assistant to the Niger State Governor, who rejected the press reports, claiming they were greatly "exaggerated." Usman insisted it was a "misunderstanding that was blown out of proportion," and that it was not religious in nature. Usman maintained that it was part of a power struggle between "royal fathers" or traditional rulers who were using ethnicity and religion to reinforce their own power bases and create a deeper divide. Usman said that Niger State has long been religiously integrated, with families often marrying across religious lines. He added that although the Nupe ethnic group in Niger State was predominantly Muslim, the Gwari ethnic group was almost evenly split between Muslims and Christians. Their respective traditional leaders, however, often quarreled over influence and status, resulting

in conflicts that sometimes break along religious lines. When asked about the reports of large numbers of suspects being detained, Usman responded that if 98 people were taken from Gwada, that would be "the end of the village" as that would account for a majority of the population.

¶4. (C) Comment: While Usman's response is to be expected as a representative of the state government, the Nigerian media also has a reputation for exaggerated stories and hyperbole. Until further investigation, we cannot say definitively what was or was not the cause of the violence - or even quantify its magnitude. Regardless of the initial spark, however, it is fair to say that an eruption of sectarian violence can occur at any time and additional localized communal violence is likely to be a recurring concern, particularly as economic times get tougher and the struggle for local power, either at the traditional or political level, take on new forms as the 2011 election season begins to take shape. We will continue to explore the circumstances surrounding this recent conflict in Niger State and monitor the situation for additional violence in other states. End Comment.

¶5. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS